Writing the Woman's Voice: On the Verandah with Jean 'Binta' Breeze

Jean 'Binta' Breeze was born in 1956 and brought up by her grandparents in rural Jamaica. She studied at the Jamaican school of drama and first visited London in 1985 to take part in the International Book Fair of Radical and Third World Books on the invitation of internationally renown dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. In the 1970s and '80s in London, Breeze became a pioneering poetic voice in the radical black community in a traditionally male dominated dub poetry scene. Often cited as 'a one-woman festival,' she has since performed her work all over the world including tours in Europe, the Caribbean, America, South East Asia and Africa.

Dub poetry is performed rather than just read and is steeped in musical rhythms. In her poem 'The Garden Path' (2000), Breeze lays out her poetic vision: 'I want to make words music, move beyond language into sound'. She is committed to this manifesto and effortlessly blends Jamaican patois with so-called 'standard' English to create innovative new poetic forms and rhythms. She is a truly hybrid artist; as comfortable on the stage delivering spoken word performances as she is singing with a reggae band or giving readings to the literary establishment.

Breeze is the author of eight books, including *Riddim Ravings and Other Poems* (1983), *On the Edge of An Island* (1997) and *Third World Girl: Selected Poems* published in 2011 by Bloodaxe Books with a DVD of live readings. Her recordings include 'Riddim Ravings' (1987), 'Tracks' (1991) and 'Riding on de Riddim' (1997). She is an honorary creative writing fellow at the University of Leicester, where she also received an honorary doctorate in January 2017. In 2012, Breeze received an

MBE for services to Literature.

Breeze's work has a very strong political dimension and her poetic voice has always called for change and resistance to the oppressive and corrosive forces of ignorance and prejudice. Whether it be her 'domestic dub,' which highlights the struggles and lived experiences of everyday women, or her call for the 'third world' to confront the 'first world' in an attempt to throw off the shackles of neo-colonialism, she is committed to bringing her message of hope and resistance to international audiences.

Breeze's poetry not only straddles the music industry and the literary establishment but also combines reflections on both inner-city life and the natural world. Breeze divides her time between urban London and rural Jamaica and her latest collection, *The Verandah Poems* (2016), is a celebration of both the simplicities and intricacies of country life in Jamaica; an ode to watching the world go by from her verandah. Indeed, the verandah plays a pivotal role in black communities across the Americas. Traditionally, the verandah or porch is at the center of folk-life and oral culture and a space key to the health of the community. African American author Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), whose work celebrates black folklore and culture in 1930s America, writes of the pivotal role the porch plays in the oral traditions and creative lives of the African American community. Similarly to Breeze's use of Patois, Huston goes to great lengths to capture the African American vernacular in her writing and her 'speakerly'[1] text emphasises the centrality of the porch in the all black town of Eatonville as a place where people can sit together, after a hard day of work, and share their stories:

[1] A 'Speakerly Text', as defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr., is a text that is replicates the patterns of oral speech and incorporates the oral tradition onto the page (Gates, 1998).

> When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to.
>
> (Hurston, 2000, p.60)

Breeze explains that in Jamaica, unlike in England, life is lived outside so people see and notice each other, pass the time of day and exchange tales. From her Jamaican verandah Breeze can observe passers-by and involve herself in the community, but it's also a safe and private space and people must be invited to enter it. In *The Verandah Poems* Breeze invites the reader onto her verandah to observe the intricate lives of visitors and passers by, feel the intensity of the tropical afternoon heat, hear the stories exchanged at the end of the day, grapple with the ghosts of the past and meditate on the changes that unfurl before her in modern Jamaica.

EZM: Can you tell us more about your beginnings as a Dub poet? You used to write and recite poetry with your mother and your childhood was very much seeped in stories and in poetry. Were the poems that you shared with your mother in Jamaican or were they in English?

JBB: My mother knew all these poems; I don't know where she got them from. There were never any books; she just has them all in her head. In old time Jamaica, and even now in Jamaica, children have to learn poems by heart and *everybody* in Jamaica knew a Miss Lou[2] poem, everybody. When I was about five or six the first poem my mother taught me was 'The Bridge Builder' by William Allen Dromgoole [1931] and

[2] Louise Simone Bennett-Coverley, affectionately named 'Miss Lou' (1919-2006), was a Jamaican poet, author, folklorist and pioneering broadcaster. She was well known for her Anansi stories and championing the use of Patois in literature and poetry.

I've *never* forgotten it; I internalised all these poems.

EZM: I heard a wonderful story about how you were first inspired to become a Dub poet. You were living up in the hills as a Rastafarian and you had this moment of inspiration?

JBB: I had a nervous breakdown, my first attack of schizophrenia and I came down out of the mountains back to my mother's house and I used to turn on my radio in the morning and do everything that the radio said. So one morning I turned on the radio and it said: 'Sitting on the dock of the bay' [Otis Reading], you know that song? So the only dock of the bay I knew was Montego Bay.

So I went to Montego Bay with my pen and paper, because every time I walked after I was ill it was with my pen and paper, and I sat in Montego Bay and a Rasta man came up to me (I had long locks at the time) and said: 'Daughter, you is a poet?' I said 'yes,' and him say: 'well we're having the ninetieth birthday of his Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie next week, you want to come say a poem?' I said 'of course', so he said 'well we have a rehearsal with the band tonight' and I said 'with the band?', him say 'yes', so I went to the rehearsal with the band that night, with my new Dub poem, and who was there but Mutabaruka[3]. So Muta listened to my poem and he said to the band: 'OK, play this rhythm'. So the band played the rhythm that Muta tell, them and I recite my poem, which was 'Slip, ya fool' and Muta said: 'Wicked poem man, I'm taking you to the studio!' and in a month I had the first recording played on radio in Jamaica as the first female Dub poet.

[3] Mutabaruka (born 1952), also known as Allen Hope, is a well known Jamaican Rastafarian dub poet, musician and prolific broadcaster who played a key role in the development of dub by helping to bring the musical and poetic form to an international audience. His work is highly political and focuses on themes of injustice and poverty in the Americas in the wake of slavery and colonialism.

EZM: What was it like being part of that early dance hall sound system scene?

JBB: It was wicked, wicked, because when I went to live in the hills as a Rastafarian, I was the only woman in that group. There were five men and me and they had a sound system so I used to just listen to the records day in day out and learn to chant and that's how the Dub came.

EZM: So you were with people like Mutabaruka and Linton Kwesi Johnston[4]?

JBB: Well after I started recording with Muta now, Linton came to do a show in Jamaica and heard my work and then invited me to England to tour with him.

EZM: And it's been described as a very male dominated scene…

JBB: Absolutely

EZM: But then at the same time you were encouraged?

JBB: They were very supportive of me, the men. Muta did my first recordings, and when I came to England Linton Kwesi Johnston took up the baton and I did two albums with LKJ Records.

EZM: So did you feel like you faced any struggles as a woman in that scene?

JBB: I was welcomed. Not only that, when I came to England the black women were so glad to see a woman. The support I got – that's why I really like sitting here now because Leeds welcomed me when I came to England in 1985. I was welcomed by

[4] Linton Kwesi Johnston (born 1952), otherwise known as LKJ, is a widely published and internationally recognized UK-based Jamaican-British dub poet. Similarly to Mutabaruka, the focus of his writing and performances are largely political. From the 1970s LKJ highlighted the struggles against racism and discrimination faced by young black Britons. As a dedicated political activist LKJ worked closely with friend and mentor John La Rose as well as organizations such as New Beacon Books, The George Padmore Institute and numerous black British youth and family organizations.

Chapeltown and people like Annette Francis. When I heard that she died I was so sad because she welcomed me to Leeds with a lot of sisters and I spent a lot of time in Chapeltown.

EZM: So you were welcomed into the dub poetry scene but it *was* very male dominated - has this now changed?

JBB: No, I don't think it has changed in the last 30 years; it is still mainly male dominated. Very few women have come to the fore internationally, since I did.

EZM: What was the UK sound system scene like in the 80s? How was that evolving differently to Jamaica?

JBB: I never came to England until '85, and when I came, boy, the blues dance. I swear right in Chapeltown they had some of the most brilliant blues dances. And you know what was nice about them? It was no ruffian thing, you dress up! You dress up to go to the blues.

EZM: Tell us more about Dub poetry, because Dub poetry has been defined as poetry in which you can hear the reggae rhythm - so that even when it's played without music you can hear the rhythm. But then your poetry has also been described as poetry that defies categorisation, and you draw from other rhythms as well – mento and jazz and blues. Did you find that reggae rhythm became a constricting form, or the title 'Dub poetry' was constricting and you wanted to move out and grow it?

JBB: It wasn't so much that it was constricting because, the thing is, I found that writing a woman's voice was sometimes so inclement that you couldn't just stick to a beat. So I found I started exploring jazz, exploring blues, in order to write the woman's voice.

EZM: I like what you said about writing the woman's voice. You described some of your poetry as 'Domestic Dub' in which you chart the experiences of women. Who do you feel you're speaking to? Is it all women, or do you want to highlight Jamaican women's daily struggles?

JBB: When I grew up my mother was a midwife, and being a midwife she had to get other women to come in and look after us while she went out to deliver babies. So we grew up with working class women but we had to say Miss Elsie or Aunty Sue, and they were women who brought us up; who cooked for us, who looked after us while my mother went out and delivered babies. So I write for women, Linton [Linton Kwesi Johnson] used to laugh at me and say: '…you sound like a brown-skinned middle class girl', but I didn't grow up as a brown-skinned middle class girl, I grew up with a real sense of what working class Jamaica was really about and I write for those women. That's why I wrote 'Ordinary Mawning' [*Tracks*, 1992] because, you know, we're here now, we're enjoying an evening out and so many women couldn't because of the children and because of the work, and so I wrote 'Ordinary Mawning' for those women.

EZM: In your latest collection *The Verandah Poems*, a wonderful collection that really inspired my students, you have a poem called 'New Men', and you write about your surprise at seeing a Rastafarian man holding a baby in the baby-carrier. I was wondering what you think about these changing gender roles today?

JBB: It's just great, fascinating. I mean, there are some great memories you know, like seeing the New Man because in 1978 I wrote 'Aid Travels with a Bomb' when Jamaica signed with the International Monetary Fund and we got all our people's

programmes just written off and then I went home in 2014 and Jamaica was again re-negotiating with the IMF Fund and I thought: 'Oh my god, not that again, the same poem in 1978 I have to be reading again!' So to sit on my verandah and watch young men who were carrying their little babies, and walking with their little boys and stopping to pick them flowers and I thought: 'Well, not everything is a disaster'.

EZM: Tell us a little bit more about the title of your new collection and why you decided that you would place the verandah at its centre.

JBB: Well after I had come out with 'Third World Girl', which was 'selected poems' and a strong political book as its title suggests, I got very ill. I had two strokes in England and I was in a coma for five days and my family thought I was dying. Anyhow, I decided I had to take time off and go home to Jamaica and just chill out. It was a very difficult time. So, when I get there, I realised that all I could do was just sit on the verandah and I realised how much I had missed that experience in England. Don't get me wrong, but England is a place for kitchens. In England, all my gatherings were in the kitchen because it's the warmest part of the house, and so I'd invite my girlfriends round, or when I go to my girlfriends' houses, we meet in the kitchen with a bottle of rum. I can't drink the rum anymore, the Doctors say: 'No more rum', so now I drink wine because it's weaker.

But, you know, when I got home I sat on the verandah and after a year of sitting there I got well again, that's why I started coming back to England on tour. The thing about the verandah is, it's a public private space so, I'll tell you what my day is like. I get up at about six in the mornings and I drink coffee, four or three cups of coffee sitting on the verandah, and I watch the morning light come into the sky across the sea, because my verandah looks out onto the sea, and everybody who passes, I

watch the village wake up and people pass by and say: ‘Morning, morning Sister Breeze, morning’ and I wave back at them.

Then, at about 8:30 – 9:00, I go a couple of miles up the road and I swim for two hours, because that’s my exercise when I’m in Jamaica. By the time I get back home, my mother – god bless her – has prepared something to eat and then, my mother married again when she was sixty five – so her husband leaves after the midday meal to go and play dominoes at the bar across the sea in front of our house. So me and my mother, we lie in the bedroom as we did in the old days when she taught me the poems and now I say my poems to her.

I’ll read and say: ‘OK well …?’ [Breeze imitates her mother] ‘No, I don’t like that one’ and, you know, we chat. Then her husband comes back about 6:30 and I shower and put on a cotton frock, sandals and walk across the road. If you’ve seen the cover of the new book you’ll see the rum bar, and I go across and I drink a few beers with the young men, well, they’re not so young anymore, they’ve grown old too, most of them are between fifty and sixty, I’m the eldest, and we drink some beer in the evening and listen to some reggae music and then go home to bed.

So that’s my day in Jamaica, and when I’m sitting on the verandah I found these poems just came. I came to England and I said to Melanie [Abrahams], from Renaissance One, and my publishers: ‘I think I’ll have a book in a year and three months’ and I went home at the end of November and by December I had written them all. They just came.

EZM: You have everyone green with envy with that description of your day; honestly, we long to be in Jamaica. Do you think that there is also a sense that the ability to reflect comes with age? That it takes time to reach that place and

space where you can observe the world, stop rushing around and actually see what is in front of you?

JBB: Yes. The think is, I think my politics have always been so stern to me, I couldn't believe that the way we felt in the 60s, when we were all singing 'Young, Gifted and Black' with Nina Simone and in the seventies, with Bob Marley and that coming of age in Jamaica, thinking that we could start a new paradise; that politically, we could become so 'right-on' and really change things in the world. And then the eighties came. Manley was out of power, Regan came into America, Thatcher came into England, it's a bit like now and Trump, and you just think: 'My god, what's going on, what's happening to the world'. After a while, you think, can I really change anything by chanting poetry, really serious political poetry?

I was a member of that scene; there was me, Linton, Oku Onoura, Mutabaruka, Mikey Smith,[5] seriously chanting political poetry in effort to change things, in an effort to speak out for voices that were not being given an ear to. To speak for people and, you know, by the time I got to sixty I was tired, I was like: 'what do I say now?' and I thought two things freed me up. I had three children and my daughters go on the Black Lives Matter march and my son plays cricket and I think: 'OK, at least I've got three children that I could send anywhere to represent me politically, that's an achievement'. Then I thought: 'Maybe if I just sit on this verandah a little while longer, and speak to the simple changes like in 'New Men,' maybe there's something to encourage us to not think that Trump is not the be-all and end-all of politics in the world, to think that there is a possibility of a future.

[5] Along with Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mutabaruka, Mikey Smith and Oku Onoura, also born in the early 50s, are internationally renowned Jamaican dub poets.

EZM: What you also do so beautifully in those poems is chart the relationship between the human world and the natural world. For someone who has grown up in a rural setting but then has also lived a very urban life you have a foot in two worlds. In *The Verandah Poems* you look out and bring our attention to that relationship between people and the natural world around them. I'm thinking of that wonderfully evocative poem 'Heat' in your new collection (and it's wonderful to hear you recite it because you really bring it to life in a way that is not possible on the page). But as well as having a foot in the rural and the urban you're also a diasporic woman, in many ways, and I was wondering what is it like for you when you return to Jamaica? Do you feel that you instantly slip back into your old shoes in your village community or, maybe not now but at certain points in your life, have you felt a bit like an outsider having to re-integrate?

JBB: No. The thing is, I never stayed out of Jamaica longer than a year at a time. That's the reason I don't own a house in England, because I thought: 'I can't pay a mortgage here and go home every year for a couple of months'. So I chose to go home every year for a couple of months. The other choice I made was to have my children educated in Jamaica, so my children lived with my mother, went to school, all of them have done their degrees at the University of the West Indies, all of them have a knowledge of how to be in an environment where it's not the colour of the skin that matters. They were just Jamaicans, plain and simple Jamaicans. So, when I go home people see me like I was just there, so the whole village welcome me, they're used to me being there so there is no: 'Oh she's been in England five, six years, ten years'. Never that. I'm never away for longer than a year.

EZM: So Jamaica is home?

JBB: It's home.

EZM: You don't have the migrant heartache in the same way?

JBB: Yep, it's always been home.

EZM: This collection is also very personal in many ways, and you talk about your father and your relationship to your father…

JBB: Yes, it's the first time I've ever written my father.

EZM: Really? I was wondering if that was cathartic? Does the verandah offer you a place to contemplate and to visit the memories of your past, the ghosts?

JBB: Oh yes. All the years of writing the woman steadfastly and suddenly when I sat on my verandah – because my father was a man of the verandah; he drank his rum on the verandah – I wrote the poems 'No Ghost' and 'Rum', both about him.

EZM: I've just finished reading Kei Miller's *Augustown* [2016] – which you've described in a review as a fabulous book – in which he charts a whole swathe of Jamaican history. I was wondering what do you feel when you look at Jamaican society today – what are the biggest changes that you see occurring? We've talked about 'New Men' and the changing gender relationships, but what else have you observed?

JBB: Well the thing that has turned me most are so many people are bleaching their faces and, you know, when I think of the 60s, 'Young, Gifted and Black' and how we all wanted to be black. I'm a brown-skinned girl but I spent every day on the beach trying to get black and now people are bleaching? I couldn't believe that. And they're

very into this DJ called Vybz Kartel[6], who is now in jail for thirty-five years for murder and who started the skin bleaching thing amongst the young people, and I say: 'My God, where have the struggles of the 60s and 70s gone?'

EZM: Do you feel you moved from the sound system scene, the Dub scene, into the literary establishment? Yet *The Verandah Poems* are in a sense very oral and steeped in 'nation-language'[7]...

JBB: Yes, yes, oral culture, yes. Because even a Jamaican, who is still roughly into dub, would love *The Verandah Poems*, you know?

EZM: Yes, yes. It always makes me think of Kamau Brathwaite and his ideas on 'nation-language,' which is a celebration of patois that draws from the oral traditions. So for you, how important is it to try and keep that alive in your work and on the page? To have that blend of so-called 'Standard English' and patois in dialogue with one-another?

JBB: Well it's just what I am. I had a father who insisted that I speak English and I had a mother and a community around me that allowed me to express myself in Jamaican. So I grew up bi-lingual and I'm really proud that I grew up bi-lingual, so I could recite a Louise Bennett poem in perfect Jamaican and then throw in a T.S. Eliot in Standard English. I love the fact that Jamaica gave me the ability to do that.

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[6] Vybz Kartel (born 1976) is a Jamaican singer, songwriter and recording artist. Well known for his explicit and sometimes aggressive lyrics he was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder in 2014. To date he has released over 50 recordings from prison and continues to be extremely popular on the dancehall scene. He has been accused of lightening his skin with bleaching creams and advocating the use of bleaching products.

[7] Barbadian scholar Kamau Brathwaite uses the term 'nation-language' (rather than pejorative terms such as 'dialect') to describe the Creolization of so called 'standard' European languages that took place in the Caribbean. He encourages Caribbean artists and writers to embrace and celebrate 'nation-language' in their creative outputs. In the postcolonial Caribbean nation-language challenges and undermines the educational, psychological and cultural control imposed by European languages in the region.

EZM: Yes, to be a part of both worlds. What about as a Rastafarian? How much do you feel that has informed your politics and your poetry?

JBB: Rastafarianism was very important to me. I was about 19 or 20 when I started going around the Rastas. I was taken in by the drums. I wanted to play drums and I loved the gathering, the drumming and the chanting that went on. It reminded me so much of the African culture in Jamaica. The gere and the etou and the kumina, so Rastafarian was my generation's idea of what Africa meant to Jamaica. So I came of age with the Rastafarians and it's the first time I started looking closely at Africa, and what was happening in Africa and started marching for anti-apartheid movements. Rastafarian led me into that path and I'll always be grateful to that movement.

EZM: So, in that sense, Rastafarianism has informed your politics but you also say in *The Verandah Poems* you became burnt out by trying to change things and rallying against the system. Do you think that poetry, music and literature – these cultural forms – can bring about political change? Do you still believe that?

JBB: That's a tough one because, like I say, I never thought I'd see Jamaicans bleaching their faces in 2016/2017 and I wonder: 'where is the Rastafarian element? Why hasn't it taught this generation that black is beautiful?' It's a very difficult one. I would like to think that Rastafarian is a bit more than the freedom to smoke ganja. That, somehow, the music will survive again. The music will surface again with a message that gets through to the new generation. That it brings back some of the strength of language, of culture, of consciousness and I think it will happen because, I know that just in the movement from my verandah, across the road to the rum bar, young people are listening to me. Young people like to hear me drop a poem in the middle of the evening and they follow Mutabaruka on the radio, he has two radio

shows in Jamaica and he's the one who plays my poems, plays my records and the young people are very into it. So, there is an underlying culture that is still happening. Thank God.

But I think there is still hope for Jamaica. There is still an underlying culture that is aware and I see it just looking at it from my verandah – you find it in the poems in my new collection 'New Men' and 'Stranger'.

EZM: Like 'New Men', the poem 'Stranger' also undercuts the stereotypical image of the Jamaican man. So as you sit on your verandah you are surprised by some positive changes as well as negative ones?

JBB: Yes, yes I am.

EZM: Jean, before we end, could you tell us a bit more about your writing. How has your writing changed across your span of your writing career?

JBB: I think it has changed depending on what was happening in my life, as either being very public, or very private. One would be a public chant or dub, another would be an intimate blues.

EZM: And are what your thoughts on the current literary climate for Caribbean writers, in particular for Jamaican women writers and poets?

JBB: There are a lot of young women coming up in Jamaica now (not necessarily in Dub). They are refreshing voices and the poetry scene is very vibrant.

EZM: A perfect place to end, and thank you so much Jean, you've transported us to the Caribbean, you've let us into your heart, you've let us onto your verandah. Thank you so much, it was wonderful.

JBB: It's a pleasure.

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